

Transcript of Blog Talk Radio Interview

Program: Rush Hour

Show: A Conversation with Rhonda Denise Johnson

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HAROLD: Hello and welcome to this special edition of Rush Hour. I'm your host, Harold Lee Rush, and we have a very very special guest with a very very special subject we're going to have a conversation with and about today. My guest is a young lady by the name of Rhonda Denise Johnson, and I guarantee that if you give her a couple of minutes she's going to share with you some information that you probably had no idea about that will definitely help you to see and maybe help someone close to you in ways you never thought about. How are you doing today, Ms. Johnson?

RHONDA: Oh, I'm doing just fine, Harold. I'm doing just fine.

HAROLD: All right, well here's the first thing I want to be able to ask you, and that is just who are you. Tell me a little about yourself.

RHONDA: Well, I am the oldest child of an oldest child. I grew up in Washington, D.C., but I've actually lived in six different states. I grew up with a hearing impairment. It advanced so slowly that for many years I was not even aware there were things I could not hear because there was so much that I could hear. And I was about twenty-three years old when I, you know, progressed into what I perceived as profound deafness. That's when, you know, I was no longer able to use the phone. Then for the next first twelve years of my adult life, I could not hear any thing at all. During that time, I earned my Master's degree using a service that used a court reporting machine...

HAROLD: mmmm

RHONDA: ..connected to a laptop. And I just basically, you know, did what I had to do.

HAROLD: mm hm. Now you had a hearing impairment, but I understand you also had an additional physical challenge?

RHONDA: Yes, I have a visual impairment also, and that also progressed very slowly until I am now what they call legally blind.

HAROLD: Wow. So now in spite of these challenges—dealing with these challenges, I understand you said you've earned a Master's degree. You got a Bachelor's degree, then you turned around and got a Master's degree. In what subjects?

RHONDA: Well, I received my Bachelor's degree in communications with a print media emphasis. And I received that from Biola University in La Mirada, California. And I got that in 1988. And a Master's degree in English with the literature emphasis from California State University in Los Angeles in 1999.

HAROLD: Wow. Now you say you spent twelve years deaf. Why are you able to hear now?

RHONDA: Oh because in the year 2000 I received what they call a cochlear implant. And that restored my hearing.

HAROLD: So now cochlear implant—is that some kind of device that, I take it because it's an implant, is implanted in your ear?

RHONDA: Yes, it's implanted in the ear. It bypasses the damaged nerves of my inner ear and sends electric signals directly to the auditory nerve. It's actually an array of electrodes. When I go to the airport,

I can make the alarms go off at the airport.

LAUGHTER

HAROLD: Wow. So can I call you Rhonda?

RHONDA: Sure, sure.

HAROLD: Okay, Rhonda. Now you've written a book with a very unusual name. It's called *Speaking for the Child*. Now first of all, why did you write the book?

RHONDA: Well, I wrote *Speaking for the Child* mainly because whenever I look back at my life experiences, to remember so much so vividly, not only the events but the thoughts and emotions that accompanied those events and then have the words to express those thoughts and emotions is a gift given by the Creator. It's a summons to help others find the strength within them in the same place—in the same way that I found my strength within me. We all have experiences. We don't all experience the exact same thing in the exact same way, but it's good to know we are not alone; that others have been through that valley we call life on Earth and have survived and not only survived but have thrived. So I have been summoned to share deeply and to share honestly what I have seen. I wrote the book in answer to that summons.

HAROLD: "Wow. That's very well put. Now who do you expect to read your book?"

RHONDA: Well, everyone, I should hope. The reader I had in mind as I wrote is someone who has struggled. Someone who has experienced joy and pain, sadness and happiness. Someone who has experience emotions so deep they cannot be defined by concrete terms like joy and pain.

HAROLD: Wow. That is everybody in a way though. Because we've all had some type of struggle. We've all experienced joy and pain. Sadness and happiness and a lot of us do feel many times when we are going through something that we are the only person in the entire world that feels this this way. So I can understand the idea that—you know, it's like the first time you have your heart broken, for example. No one can convince you that, number one, that you will survive, that you will get over it or that anybody else in the entire history of the world has ever had a heartbreak like yours.

RHONDA: Nobody.

LAUGHTER

HAROLD: So is *Speaking for the Child* a self-help book with answers for getting out of what you call the valley of life on Earth?

RHONDA: No, it's not a self-help book. It's a sharing of ideas, yes, but there is no one right way out of the valley. All of us have within us the kernel of humanity; but from the time we are babies, the world dumps so much junk on us that that kernel becomes buried. We may not know it is there. Especially when we listen to people telling us oh you're trapped. You'll never get out of the valley. You'll never be happy. There's nothing there because you're not worth anything. If we listen to that, then, you know, like the saying goes, perception is reality. If we let other people define our perception of ourselves then that perception becomes our reality. In *Speaking for the Child*, the reader will find that he or she can cast off all that junk, find the kernel within and let it grow.

HAROLD: What I'm going to do is a little something different here. We have a caller. I'm going to pull the caller up and talk to them for just a second. Hello his, you're on the air. This is Rush Hour. Who is this?

CALLER: Hi. (Indistinct)

HAROLD: I'm sorry?

CALLER: I just wanted to say thank you.

HAROLD: Oh, okay. All right. Well continue to listen and we appreciate you.

RHONDA: Yes, we appreciate you.

HAROLD: All right now—Rhonda Johnson, *Speaking for the Child*. What if I don't see myself in a valley, if I'm happy with my life and think it's all wonderful, why should I read *Speaking for the Child*?

RHONDA: Because it's a good read. It spans four decades offering a unique perspective on many of the newsworthy events that occurred between the late sixties and the early 21st century. The reader will recall many things and say hmm I never thought of it like that.

HAROLD: Right. Right. Okay now, let's deal with some specifics in terms of the book. What is your book about?

RHONDA: Well, *Speaking for the Child* is an autobiography so it is shamelessly about me. I don't say that to be arrogant. It's an autobiography. Specifically it's about the impact my disabilities had on me and those around me. How my emotional, spiritual and intellectual faculties were affected by my experience of visual and hearing impairment. For instance, when my family and I got caught up in the Word of Faith movement, being disabled gave me a different perspective than I might otherwise have had. It made me ask questions that other people were not asking. Especially, you know, when they were telling me that if you have enough faith God will heal you. Then after a while, they started blaming me when I remained deaf and they were waiting for a great miracle.

HAROLD: So they were blaming you and said you didn't have enough faith. Right?

RHONDA: Right.

HAROLD: mm. Wow. How did that make you feel?

RHONDA: It made me feel many things. It made me feel like I just could not find, you know, could not find reality, could not deal with, you know, people were just—sometimes they were overwhelming me. You know like one time a man who was a prophet came to our church and told me that since the Bible says faith comes by hearing and since I can't hear, that means faith can't come to me.

HAROLD: Ooooh! Really.

RHONDA: He actually said that to me. Then the next day he got up and told everybody that without faith it is, the Bible says it is impossible to please God.

HAROLD: Oh, wow. So you suffered at times, what really was abuse from people, in terms of people abusing you sometimes knowing and sometimes not knowing—just out of their ignorance. So all of that was weighing on you as well.

RHONDA: Yes, and like I said, it made me ask questions that other people were not asking. It made Church, you know since the time I was a small child, going to Church has been one painful experience after the other. And I felt myself having a slowly increasing sense of cognitive dissonance where there was just this wide gap between what I was taught to believe and what was

actually happening.

HAROLD: mm. Talking with Rhonda Denise Johnson who's written a book, *Speaking for the Child*. You know, as I was reading the book, one of the things that really struck me was the amount of detail that you expressed from the time that you were almost born. Did you really remember all those things from your childhood?

RHONDA: Yes, I did. I structured the book around the streets where I lived. Like I said I've lived in six different states and there are thirty one chapters. Each chapter represents a different street so that's thirty one streets. Structuring the book that way helped me to remember a lot of things that happened on those streets or in those houses. I noted in the book any events I was told about.

There are two things, particularly, that are very pivotal for me but for which I seem to have a mental block for remembering them. One of them was when I was four and my father tells me—you know, at the time I did not know he was my father. There was just this man who would come and visit me, talk to me and play with me and stuff. And he tells me when I was about four years old, I came to him and asked him, you know, "Are you my father?" And he said he went to my mother and apparently my mother must have jumped on me because when I came back and I was very mad at him, you know "Why did you tell my mother?" And I have no memory of that. What I do remember is crawling up under the couch—we had a claw footed couch—and I just crawled up under the couch and said every curse word, anything I could think to say that I knew I was not supposed to say, I said it.

The other event was when I was about nine years old and my mother and my father they finally decided to tell me "Well yes, this man is your father." You know and for a long time I just did not accept that. I did not remember them taking me to a restaurant and telling me that. All I can remember is when I just rejected the idea and I told myself no my father is a great war hero. He died in a war in Viet Nam. We had just finished the Viet Nam war. You know, I remember my reaction to these events but the events themselves, I don't remember. Not like the other things that happened in my life I have snapshots of them.

HAROLD: Well you do a phenomenal job of expressing or recreating so many different things in your life. That's one of the things that makes the book a fascinating read. But now one of the things I am curious about is why did you entitle the book *Speaking for the Child*? And also it has a subtitle, which is what?

RHONDA: The subtitle is *An Autobiography and a Challenge*.

HAROLD: And a Challenge. That's deep. Now why did you name it that?

RHONDA: Well, I wrote it *Speaking for the Child* because, you know, when we are children, we suffer a lot of things—misunderstandings, betrayals, confusion, rejection, disapproval. We have strong feelings about these things, but we may not have the words to express our inchoate thoughts. When we grow up we look back with better understanding and a bigger vocabulary that allows us to say for the child that is still within us the things that child could not say at the time when we were children.

HAROLD: A lot of times we don't seem to, I don't know, it's sort of like we don't seem to recognize in children that we deal with—our own children we don't seem to remember that we were children once and we had experiences we couldn't express and we don't give our children the benefit of that. You know one of the things about the book that makes it a must read for some particular people—anyone who has children, a child or children who first of all have disabilities. They don't have to be the same as yours but the fact that they have disabilities or physical challenges. Because one of the profound things about your book is that there were so many things that happened to you because the adults around you did not realize that what you were

experiencing were physical challenges and they got labeled as mental or psychological issues. And I thought about it as I was reading how terrible that must be to be a child. For example, you talk about your hearing loss. It was a gradual hearing loss. What made it so—in some ways I felt the pain when adults would make judgments about you based on what they perceived as not paying attention or different psychological issues.

RHONDA: Not having common sense.

HAROLD: Yes. When in reality all the time it was that you did not hear them because you could here a certain amount of things. But now here's the crazy part that, especially as a child, you did not know what you did not hear. And people assuming that you heard then they just assumed that either you didn't have common sense or that something was wrong with you psychologically because you did not respond to things that they felt you should have heard when it was really that you didn't hear it. And I think about how many children are out there like that. How many children and how many parents are trying to figure out, you know, something must be wrong but they don't have a clue that it might be a physical issue such as a hearing issue. Sometimes it might be a seeing issue—a sight issue. You know, and so hopefully in reading the book, there may be some parents—some adults who might say, you know maybe I need to have my child tested for hearing—an in depth test for hearing or an in depth test for, you know, an eye test. And not just go along with—sometimes these experts who want to declare the child mentally imbalance or deficient and want to put them on drugs or whatever. So if your book helps even one parent or one child or one person to find out that what's going on with them is physical and not mental and save them from years...

RHONDA: One child.

HAROLD: Yes, that will be powerful, you know. Now in terms of yourself. You are now older, and of course wiser. You've had some years of being able to hear. What would you say to those who are out there who are wondering if their child is having some issues that are not psychological? What would you say to them?

RHONDA: What would I say to them?

HAROLD: mm hm.

RHONDA: I would say be patient. Pay attention to what's going on. Ask yourself questions. You know, one of the questions my parents—my mother never seemed to ask was why is there a difference between the child I see at home and the child the teachers are writing about? Why is there this difference between the way my child gets along with the children she meets in the summer and the children she meets at school?

HAROLD: Wow!

RHONDA: There's a difference, then we need to find out why there's that difference and speak to the child. You know, don't say "What's wrong with you?" You know, questions like that just overwhelm a child. And also another thing that made an impact on me was my family moved around a lot, you know 31 different streets. And because of that—because we moved so much, I was never able to—I never stayed in one place long enough to be know for myself who I was rather than what was written about me.

HAROLD: Oooh that is very very profound, Rhonda. And I hope that people who are listening to this can get to the depth of what you just said because that is so vitally important. We don't know how many children are growing up today are being essentially abused because they don't have any understanding and the adults around don't have any understanding and that child is in a world, in a sense, all by themselves. And that's what I really kind of felt as I came away from reading a particular chapter, my heart just went out to you because it really did seem like you were

in a world all by yourself. Did it feel that way sometimes?

RHONDA: Yes, it often seemed that way. It often seemed like I was in a play or a movie and I was the star of the play—the star of the movie but everybody had read the script except for me.

HAROLD: Wow. Well I appreciate you taking the time to share with us today from your experiences

RHONDA: Thanks for inviting me.

HAROLD: Again, it's Rhonda Denise Johnson. The name of the book is Speaking for the Child: An Autobiography and a challenge. If you would like to get more information I would recommend that you go to her website which is [speakingforthechild.com](http://speakingforthechild.com). There you see to remember the name of the book is the name of the website, [www.speakingforthechild.com](http://www.speakingforthechild.com). You know I have to mention that you also publish an online Spoken Word poetry journal. It's Spoken Word poetry and narrative from many different writers. It's a really exciting website. It's called Visions with Voices and I It's quarterly. It's really nice because you can not only hear the Spoken Word poetry but you can also read it, because you publish the narrative of the work and that's something that is definitely different for the world. And you also have a web design business, too. So I want to throw that in there, too. What is it [lovelydayrainbow.com](http://lovelydayrainbow.com)?

RHONDA: That's right.

HAROLD: Okay. And again, that's Rhonda Johnson Speaking for the Child. That's [speakingforthechild.com](http://speakingforthechild.com), has been our guest today at Rush Hour. We are definitely looking forward to talking to you again, as well as being able to read your book and share with you the success you are bound to have.